

Return from Captivity ***(Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther & Job)***

Lesson #10

Repopulating Jerusalem ***(Nehemiah 11: 1 – 13: 31)***

Review

Finishing the wall did not end Nehemiah's project, for the city of Jerusalem still lay in ruins. Nehemiah next focused on rebuilding the city and on establishing a functioning community, a community rooted in the Mosaic law and in Temple worship, the *raison d'être* of the Jewish people.

To do so, Nehemiah reached back to the first group of exiles who had returned from Babylon after Cyrus the Great had issued his decree allowing their return in 539 B.C., establishing continuity among the returnees, a sense of history with the early pioneers who had the hutzpah to make the long journey back to rebuild a once-glorious past.

Preview

Jerusalem was—and is—the center of worship and life for the Jewish people. But a city—though encircled by a fortified wall—must have people living in it to function. We read in Nehemiah 7: 4 that *“the city was quite wide and spacious, but its population was small, and none of the houses had been rebuilt.”*

In Lesson #10, Nehemiah begins repopulating the city, moving people from Jerusalem’s surrounding towns and villages into the city proper.

In repopulating the city, Nehemiah must be careful to include a diverse group of people, for it takes many skills, trades and occupations to create a functioning community.



“Jerusalem” from the Madaba Map, a floor mosaic in the early Byzantine church of St. George in Madaba, Jordan. The Madaba Map is the earliest cartographic depiction of the Holy Land and of Jerusalem. It dates from the 6th-century A.D.



Rebuilding Jerusalem's walls was a daunting task requiring great organizational and management skills on Nehemiah's part. Repopulating the city will be an even greater challenge, however.

We learned that 42,360 men returned to Jerusalem in the wake of Cyrus the Great's decree in 539 B.C., and an additional 1,531 men returned with Ezra 81 years later in 458 B.C. That's a total of 43,891 men, in two waves.

Of course, the men came with women and children, so we might speculate that roughly 80,000 adults returned, along with perhaps 150,000 children: a total of around 230,000 people, upwards of a quarter of a million.

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But, where did they all live?

Jerusalem had been totally destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 B.C., after a brutal two-year, siege. Recall the story in 2 Kings:

“On the seventh day of the fifth month (this was in the nineteenth year of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon), Nebuzaradan, captain of the bodyguard, came to Jerusalem as the agent of the king of Babylon. He burned the house of the LORD, the house of the king, and all the houses of Jerusalem (every noble house); he destroyed them by fire . . .

. . . The Chaldean troops who were with the captain of the guard tore down the walls that surrounded Jerusalem, and Nebuzaradan, captain of the guard, led into exile the last of the army remaining in the city, and those who had deserted to the king of Babylon, and the last of the commoners . . .

. . . And from the city he took one officer who was a commander of soldiers, five courtiers in the personal service of the king who were still in the city, the scribe in charge of the army who mustered the people of the land, and sixty of the people of the land still remaining in the city. The captain of the guard, Nebuzaradan, arrested these and brought them to the king of Babylon at Riblah, and the king of Babylon struck them down and put them to death in Riblah, in the land of Hamath. And thus Judah went into exile from their native soil.”

(25: 8-11, 19-21)



**James Tissot. *The Flight of the Prisoners* (gouache on board), c. 1896-1902.
Jewish Museum, New York.**

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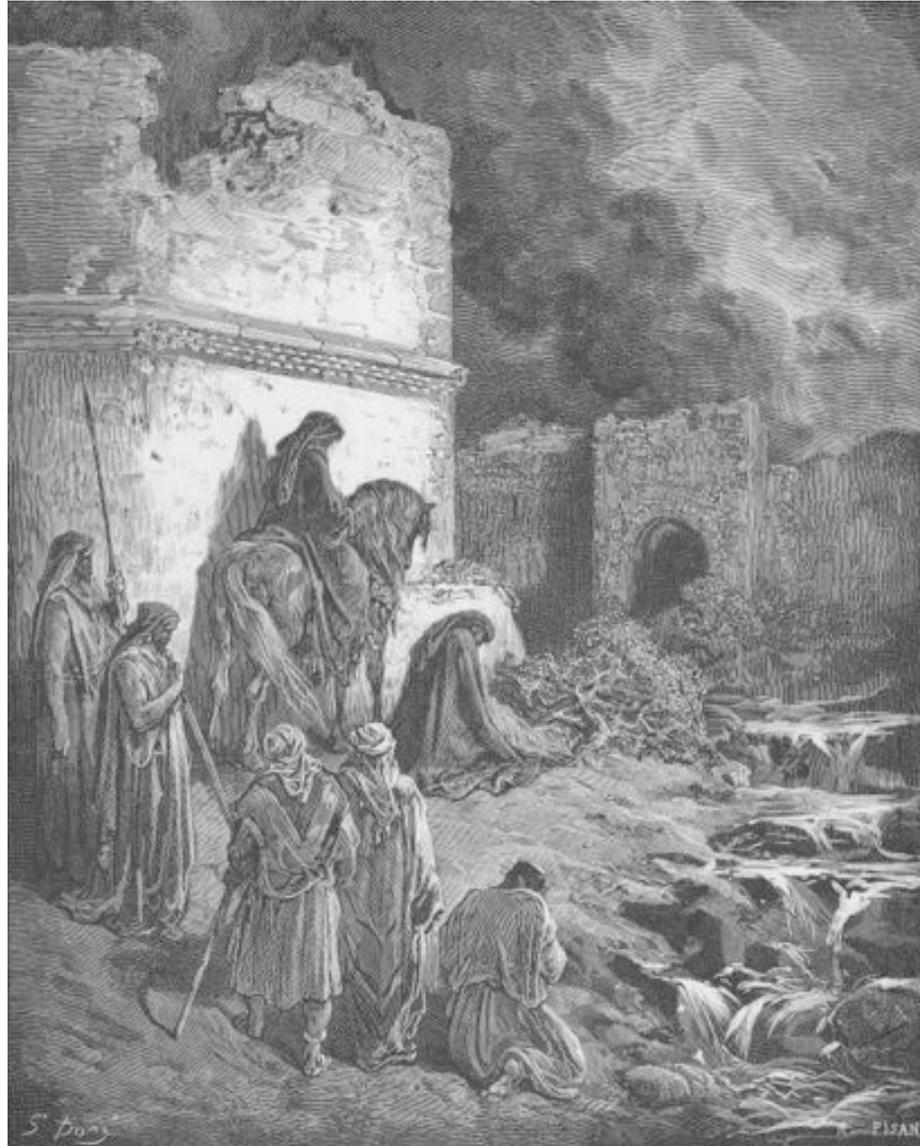


And recall Hanani's report to Nehemiah upon returning to Susa from Jerusalem in 446 B.C., 140 years after the destruction of Jerusalem:

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“The words of Nehemiah, son of Hacaliah. In the month Kislev of the twentieth year [of king Artaxerxes, November/December 446 B.C.], I was in the citadel of Susa when Hanani, one of my brothers, came with other men from Judah. I asked them about the Jews, the remnant preserved after the captivity, and about Jerusalem. They answered me: ‘The survivors of the captivity there in the province are in great distress and under reproach. The wall of Jerusalem has been breached, its gates gutted by fire.’”

(Nehemiah 1: 1-3)



Gustave Doré. "Nehemiah Views the Ruins of Jerusalem's Walls," *La Grande Bible de Tours* (wood engraving). London: Cassell and Company, 1866.



The exiles who had returned to Jerusalem between 539- 446 B.C. did not live amidst the ruins of Jerusalem; they lived in the surrounding countryside, in towns and villages scattered throughout what had been the tribal territory of Judah.

Those were the people who worked on the walls under Nehemiah's supervision; those were the people who spent *"the nights inside Jerusalem, each with an attendant, so they might serve as a guard by night and a working force by day,"* never taking off their clothes and keeping weapons at their sides (Nehemiah 4: 16-17).

This continued for 52 days while the walls were being rebuilt . . . but then they all went home.

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So, it was not enough to rebuild Jerusalem's walls; Nehemiah needed to rebuild and repopulate the city itself.

In typical "Nehemiah fashion," Nehemiah comes up with a detailed plan:

“The administrators took up residence in Jerusalem, and the rest of the people cast lots to bring one man in ten to reside in Jerusalem, the holy city, while the other nine would remain in the other cities. The people blessed all those who willingly agreed to take up residence in Jerusalem.”

(11: 1-2)

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Once again, Nehemiah leads from the front. The “administrators” or “leaders” [Hebrew = שָׂר, *sar*, “leaders” or “captains,” including Nehemiah, the governor] volunteer to move inside the city first. These were the key family heads noted in Nehemiah 7, many of whom had ancestors who returned to Jerusalem in 539 B.C. They led by example.

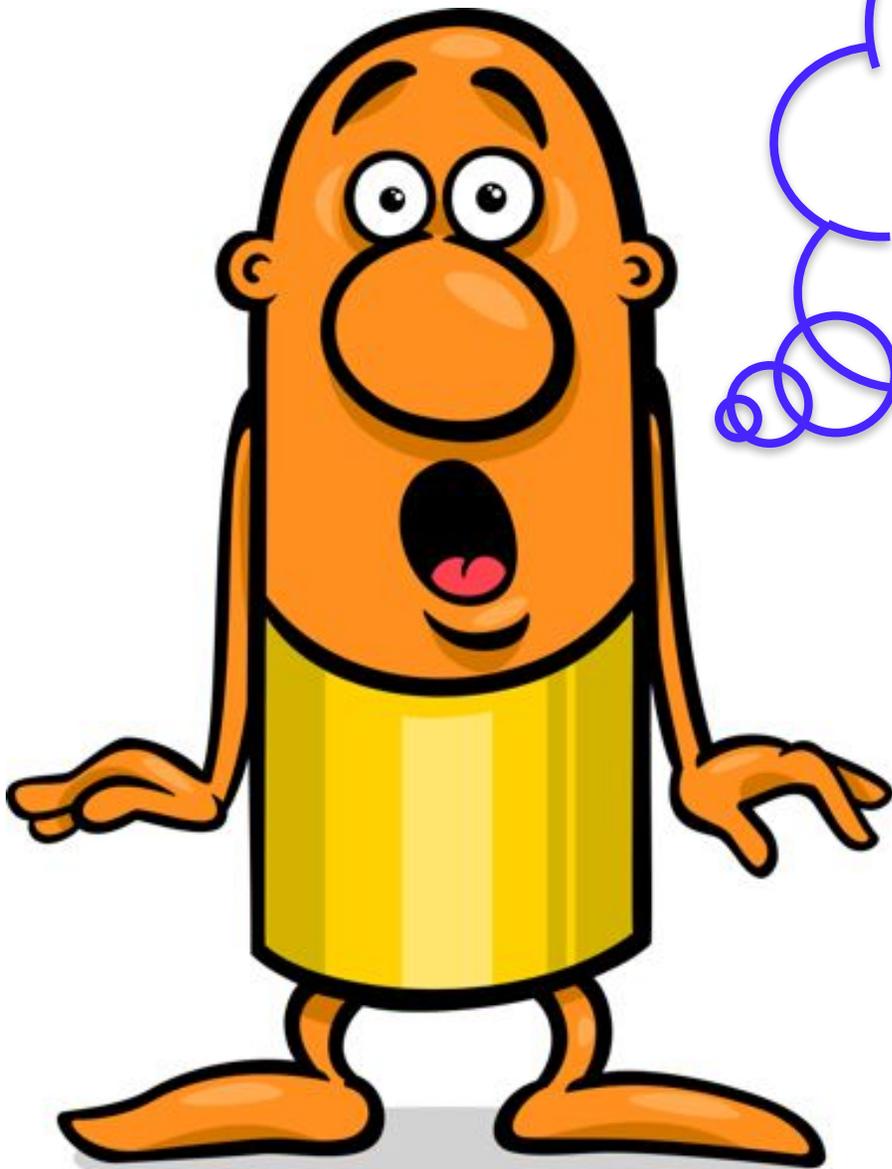


Then they have a lottery! Every 10th man, with his family, relocates to the city.



Choosing every 10th man is to “decimate” the population!

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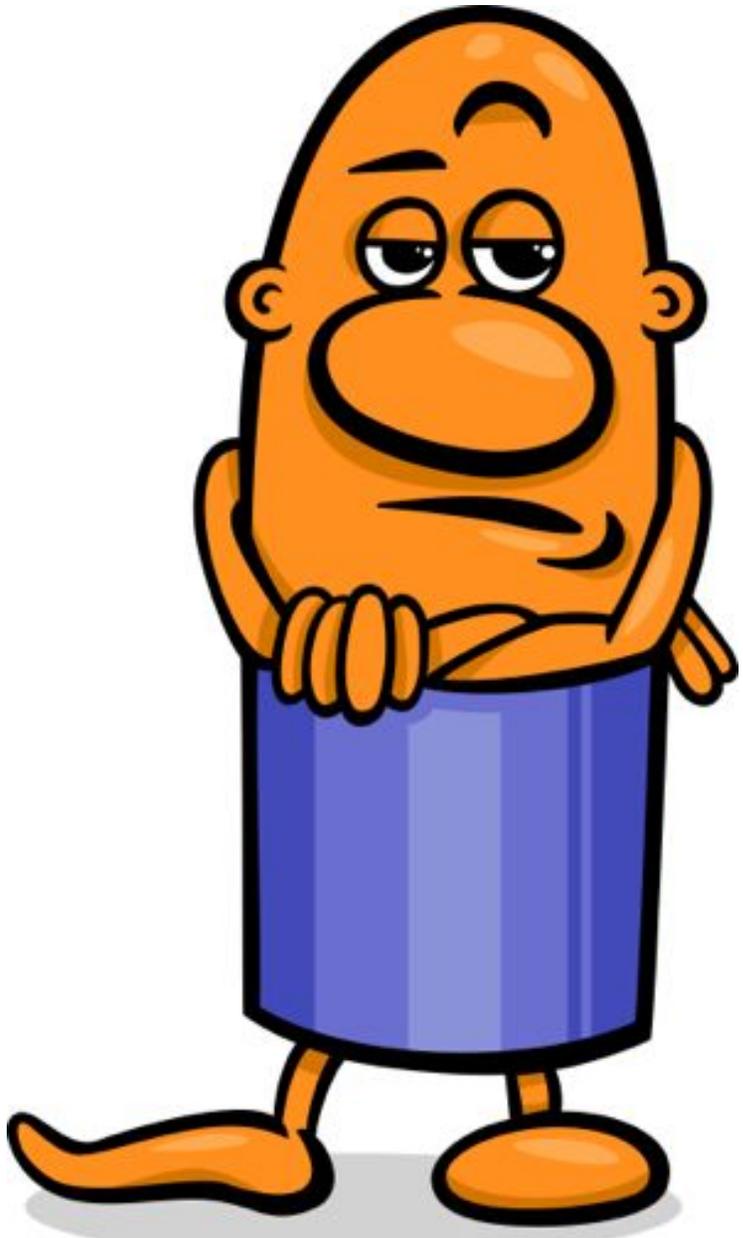


I didn't know that! I thought to "decimate" meant to kill a large number of people.

Nope! It needn't be punitive. It just means to select one of every ten. It comes from the Latin, *decem*, "ten."

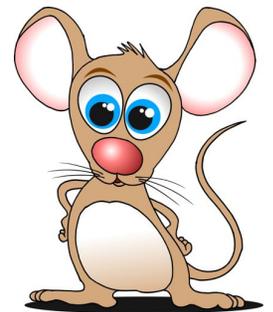


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**That's just English
professor pedantry.
Words change
meaning over time.**

**Yes they do, but words
should have etymological
precision. If they don't,
it just leads to sloppy
thinking.**



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That's enough, you two!

Nehemiah now presents a list of the leaders who take up residence in Jerusalem:

“These are the heads of the province who took up residence in Jerusalem. In the cities of Judah dwelt **Israelites, priests, Levites, temple servants, and the descendants of Solomon’s servants**, each on the property they owned in their own cities . . .



“Israelites” were the common people, while “priests,” “Levites” and “temple servants” were those associated with the operation of the Temple, those whose jobs required that they be in close proximity. The Temple was the throbbing heartbeat, not only of Jerusalem, but of the Jewish people themselves.

. . . In Jerusalem dwelt both **Judahites** and **Benjaminites**.

Of the Judahites: Athaiah, son of Uzziah, son of Zechariah, son of Amariah, son of Shephatiah, son of Mehallalel, of the sons of Perez; Maaseiah, son of Baruch, son of Colhozeh, son of Hazaiah, son of Adaiah, son of Joiarib, son of Zechariah, a son of the Shelanites. **The total of the descendants of Perez who dwelt in Jerusalem was four hundred and sixty-eight people of substance . . .**

(11: 3-6)



Ah, ha! The Judahites were descendants of Judah, Jacob's fourth son. Recall that unbeknownst to him, Judah had sex with his daughter-in-law who had disguised herself as a prostitute in Genesis 37, and she gave birth to twins: Perez and Zerah. The descendants of Perez who dwelt in Jerusalem numbered 468.



Interesting. Jesus will be a descendant of Perez, by way of Hezron, who is not mentioned here.

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Nehemiah then goes on to list the rest:



In the first half of Chapter 12, Nehemiah again reaches back in time and lists the priestly houses that had returned to Jerusalem with Zerubbabel in 539 B.C., establishing historical continuity with the current priesthood, a priesthood that identifies itself by family name, not by individuals.

Nehemiah lists 22 names. King David had organized the priesthood into 24 divisions (1 Chronicles 24: 7-19), so there may be two family names that have dropped out here, perhaps due to scribal error.*

* Recall that Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, was a priest of the division of Abijah, the 8th of the 24 divisions (Luke 1: 5). Historical continuity continues to be important, even in Jesus' day, 1,000 years after king David.

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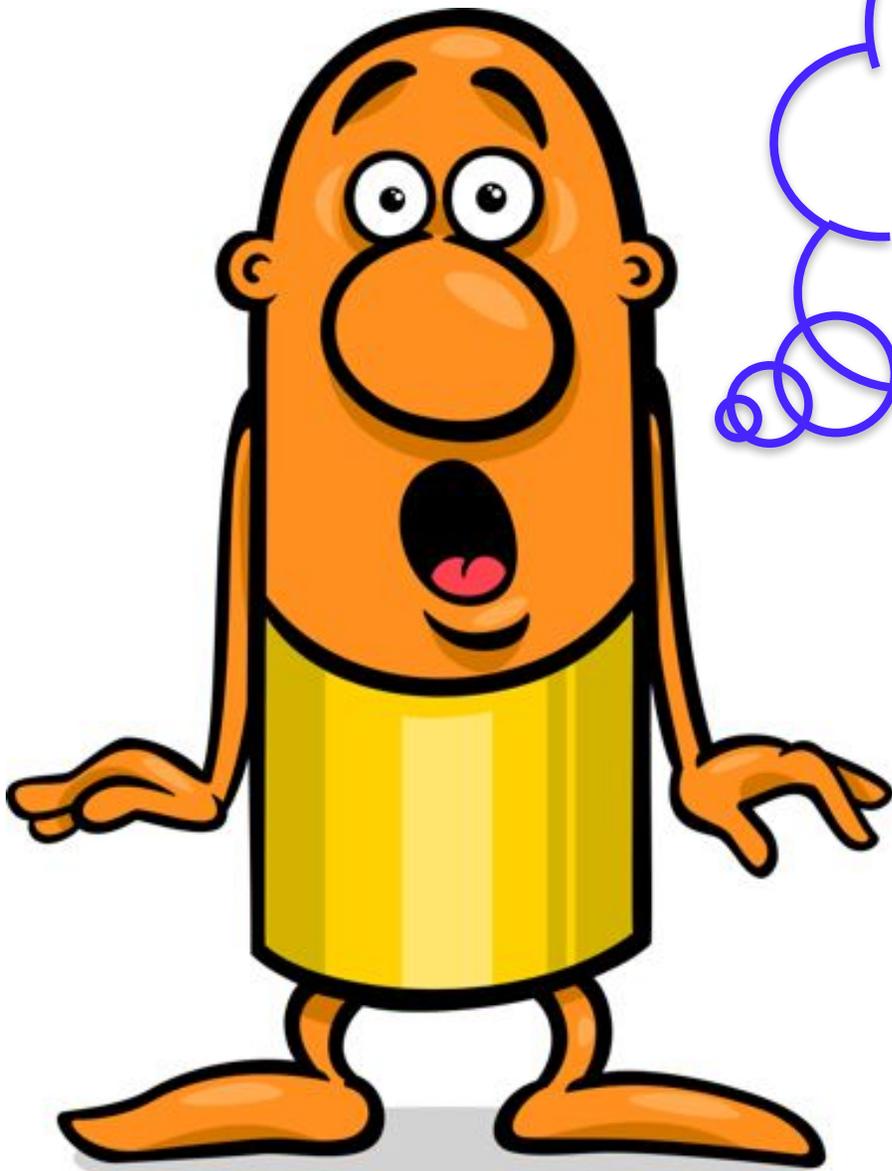


With his lists of the significant people who began repopulating Jerusalem completed, Nehemiah then invites us to the dedication of Jerusalem's walls.

It must have been quite the party!

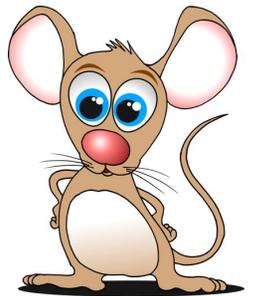
“At the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem, the Levites were sought out wherever they lived and were brought to Jerusalem to celebrate a joyful dedication with thanksgiving hymns and the music of cymbals, harps, and lyres. The Levitical singers gathered together from the region about Jerusalem, from the villages of the Netophathites, from Beth-gilgal, and from the plains of Geba and Azmaveth (for the singers had built themselves settlements about Jerusalem). The priests and Levites first purified themselves, then they purified the people, the gates, and the wall.”

(12: 27-30)



**The people came
from all around for
the festivities!**

**Everyone loves a good
party! Notice, though,
that nowhere in this
sequence is Ezra ever
mentioned.**



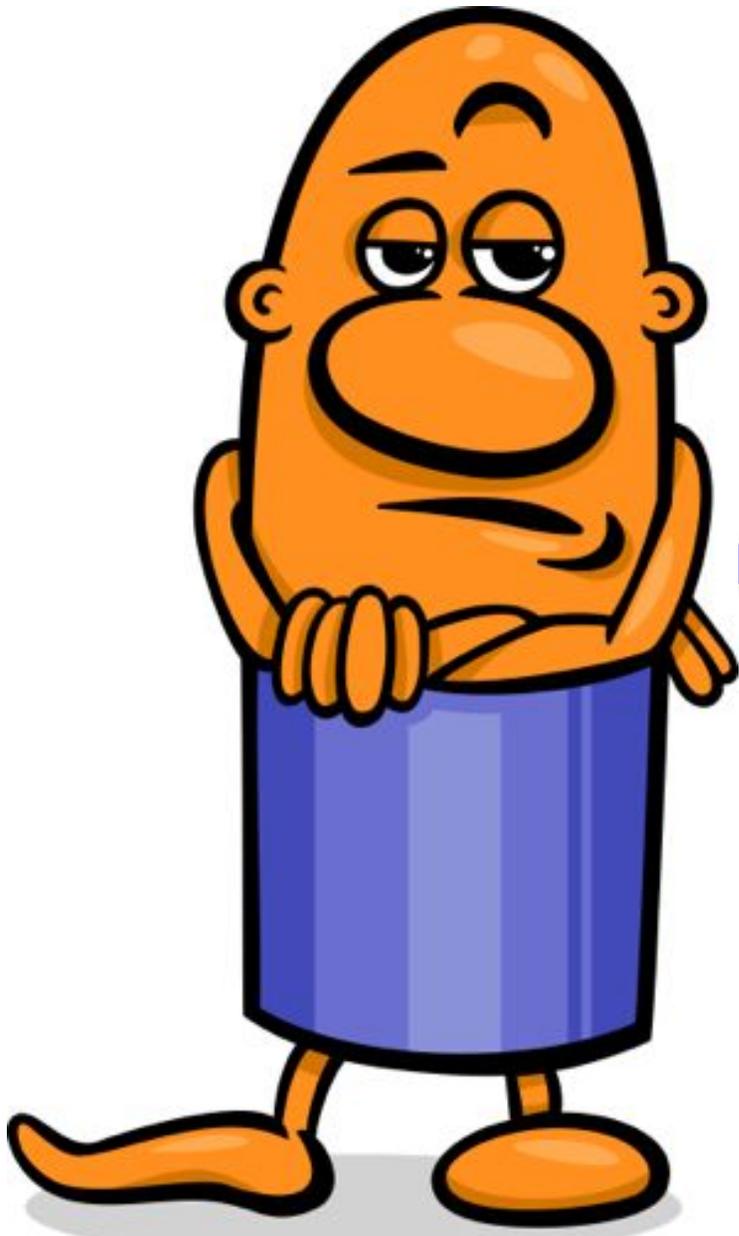
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Humm! That adds support to the position that Ezra and Nehemiah were not in Jerusalem at the same time.

“I had the administrators of Judah go up on the wall, and I arranged two great choirs. The first of these proceeded to the right, along the top of the wall, in the direction of the Dung Gate, followed by Hoshaiah and half the administrators of Judah, along with Azariah, Ezra, Meshullam, Judah, Benjamin, Shemaiah, and Jeremiah, priests with the trumpets, and also Zechariah, son of Jonathan, son of Shemaiah, son of Mattaniah, son of Micaiah, son of Zaccur, son of Asaph, and his kinsmen Shemaiah, Azarel, Milalai, Gilalai, Maai, Nethanel, Judah, and Hanani, with the musical instruments of David, the man of God. **Ezra the scribe was at their head.**”

(12: 31-36)



Oops! There's Ezra the scribe again. This complicates the Ezra/Nehemiah issue, considerably. Some regard this as a later scribal insertion to harmonize Ezra and Nehemiah, but there is no textual evidence to support that. This seem, rather, to support the position that—in spite of the textual difficulties—Ezra and Nehemiah were present in Jerusalem at the same time.

And having Ezra at the head of the procession suggests his importance.



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“The second choir proceeded to the left, followed by myself and the other half of the administrators, along the top of the wall past the Oven Tower as far as the Broad Wall, then past the Ephraim Gate to the Mishneh Gate, the Fish Gate, the Tower of Hananel, and the Hundred Tower, as far as the Sheep Gate. They came to a halt at the Prison Gate . . .

. . . Both choirs took up a position in the house of God; I, too, and half the magistrates with me, together with the priests . . . The singers were heard under the leadership of Jezrahiah. Great sacrifices were offered on that day, and they rejoiced, for God had given them cause for great rejoicing. The women and the children joined in, and the rejoicing at Jerusalem could be heard from far off.”

(12: 38-43)



Once the party ends, Nehemiah continues his 1st-person narrative, telling us how he instituted reforms in Jerusalem, reforms that addressed problems that had been going on for a long time:

“At that time, when the book of Moses was being read in the hearing of the people, it was found written there: ‘No Ammonite or Moabite may ever be admitted into the assembly of God; for they did not meet the Israelites with food and water, but they hired Balaam to curse them, though our God turned the curse into a blessing.’ When they had heard the law, they separated all those of mixed descent from Israel.”

(13: 1-3)



This harkens back to the intermarriage issue we encountered earlier in the book of Ezra. This is a different, later time, though, for the next set of verses begins: *“Before this [i.e., the intermarriage crisis noted here], the priest Eliashib . . .”* (13: 4).

Nehemiah tells us that he had returned to Susa in 433 B.C., and that some time later he returned to Jerusalem (13: 6-7). We don’t know when that was or how long he stayed on this second visit, but the intermarriage crisis here in Chapter 13 takes place during that second visit.



**What was that business
about the Moabites hiring
Balaam to curse the
Israelites?**



During the Israelites' generation in the wilderness following the Exodus, they are camped on the Plains of Moab preparing to cross the Jordan River and begin the conquest of Canaan by attacking Jericho. Balak, king of Moab, is terrified at the half-million man army camped on his doorstep.

Clearly unable to engage the Israelites and defeat them in battle, Balak sends for a famous seer to curse the Israelites. Perhaps then, Balak will be able to defeat them. The story spans Numbers 22-24:

“At that time Balak, son of Zippor, was king of Moab; and he sent messengers to Balaam, son of Beor, at Pethor on the river, in the land of the Ammonites, to summon him with these words, ‘A people has come out of Egypt! They have covered up the earth and are settling down opposite me! Now come, curse this people for me, since they are stronger than I am. Perhaps I may be able to defeat them and drive them out of the land. For I know that whoever you bless is blessed and whoever you curse is cursed.’”

(22: 4-6)



Balaam gladly accepts the offer . . . after haggling for a much higher fee, of course. But he is unable to curse the Israelites, for each time he tries, he utters a blessing instead!

The whole story is entwined with the hilarious episode of Balaam’s “talking ass,” as Balaam rides to deliver his curses. In the story, Balaam’s ass encounters the angel of the Lord three times while on the trail : the first time, she simply turns aside, and Balaam beats her; the second, she pushes close to a wall, crushing Balaam’s foot, and he beats her again; and the third, she lays down under Balaam, and he beats her with his staff.



The third time, in a stroke of divine inspiration, God opens the ass's mouth and she says, *"What have I done to you that you beat me these three times?"*

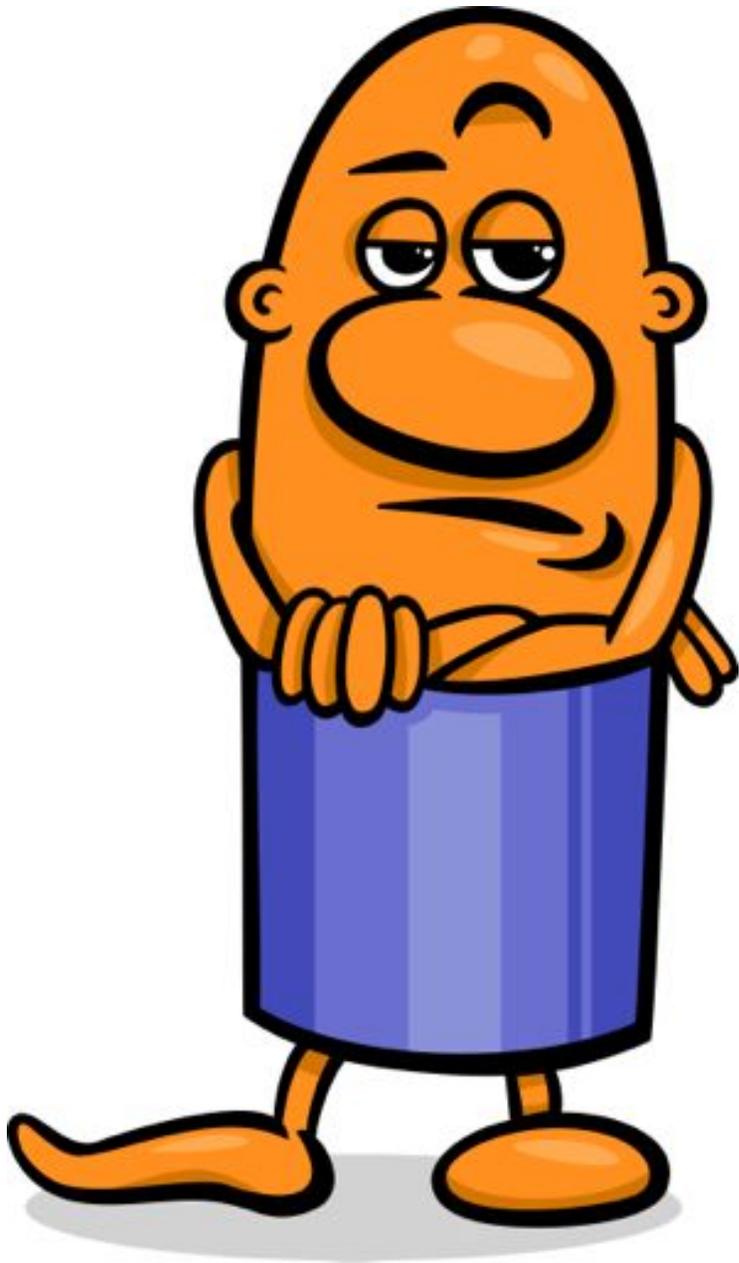
Rather than stand back, astonished at a talking ass, Balaam erupts in anger: *"You have acted so willfully against me . . . that if I only had a sword in my hand, I would kill you here and now."*

The comedy is only heightened as the ass calmly replies: *"Am I not your [ass], on which you have always ridden until now? Have I been in the habit of treating you this way before?"* "No," Balaam replies sullenly, as it dawns on him what he is doing—holding a conversation with an ass (22: 28-30)!

**“What have I done
to you that you
beat me these three
times?”**



**Rembrandt. *Balaam and His Ass* (oil on oak panel), 1626.
Musée Cognacq-Jay, Paris.**



**As it turns out,
Balaam is the real
ass in the story!**



Unable to curse the Israelites, Balaam reverts to “Plan B.” Rather than curse the Israelites and have Balak defeat them in battle, Balaam counsels the Moabites to have their women seduce the Israelites, intermarry with them and join the Moabite people, becoming one people.

If you can’t kill ‘em with swords, kill ‘em with kindness!



The plan fails miserably when Moses hears of it, attacks the Moabites and Midianites and slaughters every woman and female child among them!

The Israelites are not to “intermingle the holy seed with the peoples of the lands” and their “abominations” (Ezra 9: 1-2).



Balaam and his talking ass!

Photography by Ana Maria Vargas

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“Before this, the priest Eliashib, who had been placed in charge of the chambers of the house of our God and who was an associate of Tobiah, had set aside for the latter’s use a large chamber in which had previously been stored the grain offerings, incense and vessels, the tithes in grain, wine, and oil allotted to the Levites, singers, and gatekeepers, and the offerings due the priests . . .



Ah, ha! Remember Tobiah? Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshem the Arab had plotted to foil Nehemiah's efforts at rebuilding Jerusalem's walls. They failed, but Tobiah was corresponding with the wealthy Jewish money lenders whom Nehemiah had chastised. I knew that would bring more trouble for Nehemiah!

With Nehemiah in Susa, Eliashib the priest has given Tobiah living quarters in the Temple!



. . . During all this time I had not been in Jerusalem, for in the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes, king of Babylon, I had gone back to the king. After a suitable period of time, however, I asked leave of the king and returned to Jerusalem, where I discovered the evil thing that Eliashib had done for Tobiah, in setting aside for him a chamber in the courts of the house of God . . .

. . . This displeased me very much, so I had all of Tobiah's household goods thrown outside the chamber. Then I gave orders to purify the chambers, and I brought back the vessels of the house of God, the grain offerings, and the incense.

(13: 4-9)



Ha, ha, ha!

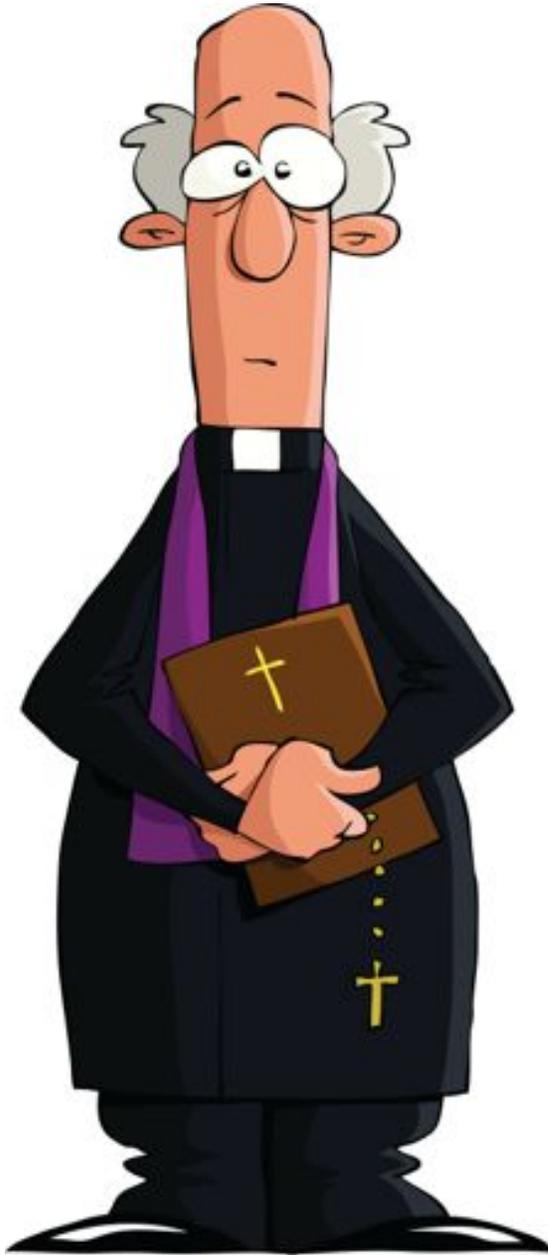
“I learned, too, that the portions due the Levites were no longer being given, so that the Levites and the singers who should have been carrying out the services had deserted to their own fields. I reprimanded the magistrates, demanding, ‘Why is the house of God neglected?’ Then I brought the Levites together and had them resume their stations. All Judah once more brought in the tithes of grain, wine, and oil to the storerooms.”

(13: 10-12)

“In those days I perceived that people in Judah were treading the wine presses on the Sabbath; that they were bringing in sheaves of grain, loading them on their donkeys, together with wine, grapes, figs, and every other kind of load, and bringing them to Jerusalem on the Sabbath day. I warned them to sell none of these provisions.”

(13: 15)

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So, on his return from Susa, Nehemiah tosses Tobias and his stuff out of the temple, reinstates tithing and enforces the Sabbath laws.

Finally, he deals with the mixed-marriage issue, as Ezra had done earlier . . . though to no avail.

“Also in those days I saw Jews who had married women of Ashdod, Ammon, or Moab. Of their children, half spoke the language of Ashdod, or of one of the other peoples, and none of them knew how to speak the language of Judah. So I reprimanded and cursed them; I beat some of their men and pulled out their hair; and I adjured them by God: ‘You shall not marry your daughters to their sons nor accept any of their daughters for your sons or for yourselves! . . . So I cleansed them of all foreign contamination.’”

(13: 23-30a)

Questions for discussion and thought

- 1. Rebuilding Jerusalem's walls was a huge task, but repopulating Jerusalem was an even bigger task. Why?**
- 2. Who were the first people to move into Jerusalem?**
- 3. How did Nehemiah decide who would move from their homes in the countryside and into the city, a city that needed major repairs?**
- 4. What was the "teaching of Balaam"?**
- 5. Who is the more effective character in our story: Ezra or Nehemiah?**

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